

# SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

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## Abstract

*The article traces selective trends in sociological and social scientific studies of the Old and New Testament over the past twenty years. The contributions of scholars like NK Gottwald and WA Meeks are considered along with other seminal thinkers. While sociological studies in particular have the potential to raise new questions and so bring new insights to the biblical text, often the real significance of such methodologies is to be found in the interface with cognate fields like archaeology and literary studies. The resultant studies may in turn assist in providing the necessary framework within which to interpret both the Bible and one's own socio-political context.*

## 1. Introduction

In reflecting upon the frenetic activity of sociological and social scientific studies of the past twenty years, certain trends have become apparent. Some have offered valuable insights into the biblical text, while others have ended as *cul de sacs*. We are, therefore, at the point where we can begin to ask what this 'new trend' has brought to an understanding of the Bible and more importantly what potential directives are indicated for future research. How has the interpretation of the Bible been enhanced by sociological studies? What new insights have emerged which would otherwise have been lost to the academic study of the Bible? What are the most promising directions for future research? To such questions we dedicate this inquiry.

## 2. Old Testament Study

One cannot consider the use of sociology in the study of the Old Testament without mention of one of the giants of the field, Norman Gottwald. His *Tribes of Yahweh* (1979) will long stand as a monument to Old Testament study and as a clear guide on how sociological study should be done.

### 2.1 The Origins of Israel

Gottwald completed in full sociological garb what Mendenhall (1962) had instinctively postulated, namely that it was in the cultural transformation of Canaan during the late bronze age, that one may discover the birth of Israel and its unique religion. The consensus that Joshua conquered the land with skillfully organized *Blitzkrieg* had for some time been seriously questioned by both archaeologists (e.g. Callaway 1968, Kenyon 1965 and Aharoni 1967), and Biblical scholars (Alt 1966, Noth 1960 and Weippert 1971). While Gottwald's *Tribes* and his advocacy of the peasant revolt model has not met with significant consensus, a broad coalition of archaeologists and scholars (see Freedman and Graf 1983 and Dever 1990) would concur that Israel was born out of the turbulence of the late bronze age, rather than the entrance of a significant number of invading outsiders. Here the evidence of the pottery speaks with eloquence. Canaanite

and Israelite pottery are uniformly alike, so that there is a logical evolution from the pottery of the late bronze age Canaanites to the pottery of the Israelite monarchy (see Kenyon, 1967:198-202). No abrupt changes of style, typical of the entrance of an alien culture, are evident, other than the collar-rim jar (London 1989). Instead the pottery declares that Israelite and Canaanite cultures were one and the same.

More contentious has been Gottwald's definition of tribal Israel as egalitarian, with Yahwism viewed as the ideological projection (in Gottwald's terms, the servo-mechanism) of this community (1979:700-709). More recently (1992:70-72), Gottwald has modified his view to speak of Israel as communitarian rather than egalitarian, thus recognizing the difficulty of using the latter term for a society which while orientated towards the best interests of the community, yet retained a patriarchal foundation. The role of Yahwism within the process has not been developed beyond its somewhat ambiguous position in the *Tribes*, where Gottwald attempted to combine a marxist perspective (being determines consciousness) with a traditional religious view of a God who impacted both history and consciousness (see Domeris 1988: 387-390).

## 2.2 The Monarchy

Mendenhall (1975) was also the first to pinpoint Solomon's reign as the decisive moment in the movement from tribal federation to the full blown experience of a typical ancient near eastern tyranny. Old testament history would never be viewed in the same light again. Solomon as the kindly wise monarch had died and in his place appeared a power hungry, skilful manipulator and oppressive tyrant. Curiously that side of Solomon had always been there in the text but generations of scholars had played down that picture.

The work of the SBL seminar on the sociology of the monarchy, whose deliberations appeared in summary form in *Semeia* 37, represent to a large extent commentary upon Gottwald's thesis of the origin of Israel (eg Coote and Whitelam 1986, Chaney 1986 and Gottwald 1986). The important work of Frick (1985) on the formation of the state in Israel, along with Hopkins' treatment of the highland villages (1985) provide valuable background to any treatment of the period, but there still remains a need to deal in full with the emerging picture of the Israelite monarchy from the archaeological excavations at sites like Dor, Hazor, Jerusalem, Lachish, Arad, Jezreel and Dan (eg Biran and Naveh 1993). The same excavations are already beginning to assist in a better understanding of the origins of the cult of Israel (see Keel and Uelinger 1992). Semantic studies of Hebrew terms found within the symbolic world of the cult indicate that the religion of Israel depended heavily on the terminology of Canaanite religion for divine epithets, types of sacrifices and even mythological constructs like the divine assembly (see for example De Vaux 1961:433-454 and Cross 1973:44-76,145-194). At times the religions of Canaan and of Israel must have appeared undistinguishable, as was probably the case in the time of Hosea and later of Jeremiah (Domeris 1994). The City of David excavation (Shiloh 1984) showed that female figurines abounded in the homes of the Israelites in the late Iron Age. In the biblical text the Deuteronomistic historian clearly indicated the extent of Canaanite influence within the temple cult (2 Kgs 21). Patai (1990:50) has argued that for most of the time that the temple of Solomon was in existence it was used simultaneously for the worship of Astarte or Asherah and Yahweh. Was there then no real difference between the religion of Canaan and the religion of Israel? Did the prophets represent a minority voice within Israel? Probably they did, but as the evidence of the pottery seals indicates according to

Keel and Uelinger's careful study of hundreds of ancient seals (1992), the religion monarchy when the distinctive culture of Yahwism made its presence felt, such as in the absence of human figures. The voice of the prophets resonates with the seals to form the conviction that within Israel there existed a 'Yahweh-alone' party who waged ideological war against the dominant culture composed of the synthesis of Yahwism and Canaanite religion (see Domeris 1994:14).

Comparatively few sociological studies of the prophets exist, and even works with hopeful titles like that of Wilson's, *Prophecy and society in ancient Israel* (1980) deal with the social function of the prophets, rather than any analysis of the social conflict which motivated them. Coote's work on Amos (1981), and Mosala's study of Micah (1989:101-153) are exceptions. Coote and Mosala illustrate how the prophets challenged the dominant ideology of their time, which turned the poor into the marginalized, and those shamed. Their heads, as their symbol of honour, are trampled into dust (Am 2:7). Coote speaks of the war which the rich wage on the poor (1981:14-24), and the warning of Amos that Yahweh has declared war on them in turn.

King's commentary on Amos, Hosea and Micah (1988) making reference to archaeological data represents a novel departure from the traditional theological focus of Old Testament commentaries. Finally the work by Nakanose (1993) on the reforms of Josiah, warrants a place. Nakanose indites king Josiah for attempting to enhance his hegemonic control over Judah, through his system of centralization of the cult, and particularly his nationalization of the family festival of Passover (1993:112). Josiah is revealed without his deuteronomistic guise. Such studies make use of what Walter Benjamin (see Eagleton 1981 and Domeris 1991b) termed a process of 'reading against the grain'. Thus Mosala (1989:32-36,65-68), urged the reader to heed both the words of the biblical text and its, albeit partially concealed, current of underlying class conflict, in his critique of the social scientific endeavour. However, such a route as that proposed by Mosala would require a far fuller understanding of the complexity of the relationship between text and ideology, than that evident in Mosala's work (see Domeris 1991b:76-79).

The collection of essays on Anthropology and the Old Testament (Lang 1985) contains several key articles including Lang's 1983 study of the social organization of peasant poverty Overholt's study of the problem of cross cultural comparison. In general, however, for the social and sociological study of the Iron Age period of the Hebrew Bible, much work still remains to be done. Moreover, until there is a clearer understanding of the way in which ancient societies, like that of the Judaeen monarchy, functioned, such studies will be of limited value. Manifestly there is a greater need for co-operation between archaeology and anthropology on the one hand and the literary-historical studies of the Bible on the other. Tribal Africa may yet contain some clues pertinent to this search.

### 2.3 The Exile

Studies relating to the exile range from the work of Hanson on the *Dawn of Apocalyptic* (1975) to the recent considerations by Gottwald (1992) and Carroll (1992) concerning the mythology propagated by the elite resident in Babylon. Using Eagleton (1981) and the work of a South African student, S de Gruchy (De Gruchy and Guthey 1984), Gottwald (1992:43) raises the question of the silence of the exilic texts concerning the poor of the land, on whose behalf God had sentenced the elite to exile (at least in the opinion of Jeremiah). What happened in the exile to bring about a change of

emphasis from the oppressed poor to the remnant of the exiles? Carroll (1992:79) speaks of the 'myth of the empty land' where the inhabitants of the exile conveniently ignored the presence of Israel outside of Babylon. He links this to the myth of the destruction of the Canaanites which had created both a cause and a cure for the defilement of the land. Such studies challenge the way in which we read the Hebrew Bible and illustrate the ease with which we, the reader, fall victim to the mythology of the writer.

## 2.4 Social Values

Poverty and oppression form a major category in Old Testament thinking (see Hanks 1983 and Pleins 1992). However, aside from some recent semantic studies, particularly as related to the wisdom literature (e.g. Wittenberg 1986), and the social world of the wise (Pleins 1987), much of the material is outdated. The task of researching poverty in the Hebrew Bible remains largely undone. One is hard pressed to find academic treatments of the social situation of the oppressed poor in the Old Testament, or a proper foundation on which to build a full appreciation of the teaching there on poverty and wealth. Most theological dictionaries lack an entry on oppression and only a few consider oppression (e.g. the new Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1992, and the forth-coming New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology) within the context of poverty. Yet poverty and oppression clearly belong to the same semantic field, and the wealth of terms dedicated to poverty and oppression should make this a major biblical theme. With their sensitivity to such issues, third world theologians should be able to make a major contribution in this regard.

Another important area of OT research is related to social values, particularly shame and honour, impurity and purity. Mary Douglas, the cultural anthropologist, pioneered this endeavour with her work on purity and ritual in Leviticus (1966). More recently L Bechtal (1991) has considered shame as a form of social sanction, a punishment for particular 'crimes' against society. The basis for our present understanding of shame and honour is dependent on the work of the modern cultural anthropology of the Mediterranean world (see Malina 1981). Honour is best defined as the status given one by one's society. The quest for honour is a male prerogative, and corresponds to the competition for scarce resources, including attractive women, good lands, status and power. By contrast shame represents the feminine side, introverted and protected. A well developed sense of shame is the mark of a respectable wife, while her opposite is the whore who is shameless. That the oppressive nature of this shame/honour culture was exploitative of women is rarely considered (but see Schneider 1971). Indeed the honour-shame culture is rarely seen as an exploitative structure. This is because most of the biblical scholars who use cultural anthropology prefer the structural functionalist model with its myth of the harmonious society, rather than the conflict model which recognizes that society runs on the adrenalin of the pursuit of power and the competition for prized acquisitions, including status and wealth (see Domeris 1993).

In conclusion, sociological studies, on their own, have not changed the study of the Old Testament. The work of Gottwald is probably the exception. However, sociological studies, when taken in conjunction with the findings of archaeology and better methods of reading the text of the last twenty years, have brought a far deeper appreciation of the world of the Hebrew Bible.

### 3. The New Testament

After several false starts, sociological studies of the NT have begun to bear fruit. The work of Tidball (1983) and Holmberg (1990) offer a valuable overview (see also Theissen 1992:1-31). Two areas in particular have proved to be the focal points of socio-historical and sociological studies. The first is the study of the historical Jesus and the second the study of the various contexts of the early Christian communities.

R Scroggs in 1983 wrote an appraisal of sociological studies of the New Testament, following the earlier work of Smith (1975), in which he listed the significant trends. These trends have been added to in subsequent years (Domeris 1989 and 1991, Van Staaden and Van Aarde 1991). Now some 20 years after Smith wrote his study, we are able to map in some detail the pathways of the overall trends. We see, for example that considering the early Christian communities as millenarian movements (Gager 1975), treating Jesus as a wandering charismatic (Theissen 1978), and other attempts to develop a sophisticated socio-linguistic key (eg Belo 1976) for interpreting the NT, have not as yet delivered the means of unlocking the Gospels. The use of Mary Douglas' fields of Grid and Group (as by White 1986) has done little to enlighten readers of the Gospels. Indeed, in the case of the Johannine study of Neyrey (1988), the results are paradoxically at odds with Douglas's own writings (see Domeris 1993).

#### 3.1 The historical Jesus

To date neither the marxist modes of production nor the sociology of knowledge has been able to supply the definitive key for rediscovering the historical Jesus. Such a figure remains the Schweitzerian enigma. To the extent that conflict models have helped to unravel the competition between the dispossessed of the Judaeian peasants and the absentee landlords among the Sadducees, such models have proved successful. But the uniform failure of such models remains their inability to uncover a model capable of treating both the Gospel texts and the actions of Jesus together. Instead one encounters text-centered methods side by side with a socio-historical approach, which may or may not be compatible. If Jesus is an opponent of the dominant ideology of his time, but the Gospels are the literary products of another generation and another class, then we need some means by which we can connect the Jesus of the socio-historical context with the Jesus of the Gospels. We need a technique for reading the Gospels against the grain. While some attempts have been made in this direction (Mosala 1989, Myers 1988 and Long 1994), the tendency remains the predilection for moving from the socio-historical picture to the Gospel as it presently stands.

The monumental work of scholars like Crossan (1991), Meier (1991) Horsley (1989) and Theissen (1992a and 1992b) continue to challenge the status-quo regarding the historical Jesus. In contrast to the figure of Jesus there is an emerging scholarly consensus on the social world of Jesus' time. The valuable work of scholars like Oakman (1986), Horsley (1987), Moxnes (1988) and Waetjen (1989) to name just a few have revealed a society divided, if not by class, then at least by power. While the emphasis on class conflict, is understandable (e.g. Nolan 1980 and Pixley 1983), one needs to press beyond a simplistic division based on the modern division of class in order to develop fully the social dimensions of poverty. Where the dominant values were encoded in a scale of shame and honour, class conflict needs to be redefined as, for example, the contest for scarce resources (see Schneider 1971).

The Jesus mission is understood correctly in terms of a contending ideology in opposition to the hierarchy of purity established by the high priests (Waetjen 1989, Myers 1988 and Belo 1976). However, there remains the need to deal analytically with the dominant hegemony which formed the protective layer about the cold ideology, of the highpriestly power base. Hegemony, a Gramscian term, was the dissemination of propaganda, the Orwellian ministry of truth, which won over the hearts of the people and encouraged Jewish workers to clamour for the crucifixion of their king. The conflict of power, between Jesus and his enemies, is a complex one and sociological studies could contribute greatly to a deeper understanding of the interface between the words and works of Jesus.

### 3.2 The world of the Early Church

Pauline studies have surged forward in leaps and bounds owing to the generous amount of material broadly commensurate with the Pauline context both in time and space. The sociology of knowledge has been the dominant methodology, dealing with the symbolic world of Paul, in terms of households, patron-client patterns, as well as theories of education and explanations for the growth of the early Christian communities. Even the values of shame and honour have been utilized successfully in understanding particular concepts in the Pauline correspondence. The monumental work of W Meeks on *Urban Christianity* remains the definitive work in spite of its tendency to explain such Christianity within a structural functionalist perspective, as if unaware of the competitive nature of the struggles which obviously existed in these communities and between Paul and other Christian leaders. Recent works include the writings of Esler (1994), Holmberg (1990), Theissen (1987, 1992b) and Malherbe (1987) to name but a few.

The important collection by Neyrey of studies on the social world of Luke/Acts (1991) contains a significant number of important articles. Shame-honour and patron-client are just two of the categories which promise significant potential for future research.

Sociological studies have taken us somewhat towards a contextual reading of the Bible, enough to expose our own prejudices and predilections. In time, a better appreciation of the world of the Bible in all its complexity may emerge, but for the moment many approaches are guilty of what Judge (1960) called, 'the sociological fallacy', namely the tendency to import twentieth century concepts such as our understanding of a worker's struggle, economic views of poverty and modern views of freedom into the first century documents. Cross cultural models on the other hand claim some freedom from this accusation, but yet need some refining (Domeris 1993b). We have yet to conduct a proper study of issues like poverty in the Bible, or the values of shame and honour. So much work remains to be done.

### 4. The South African Contribution

South Africans have long been interested in sociological studies. Since this is probably the most familiar section of this study, I shall only deal very briefly with it. Broadly speaking we may discern three basic trends. The first is those writers who see their primary task as tabulating the primary directions in the form of a scholarly view, akin to this present article (e.g. Van Staden and van Aarde 1991). The second and probably most obvious trend is the discussions of methodology, which has long been an

overriding concern of South African New Testament scholarship (e.g. De Villiers 1984, Botha 1993, Craffert 1991,1992, Joubert 1987, 1990, 1991). Sociological studies are compared with socio-historical studies. The advantages of cross cultural methods are emphasized. Particular approaches are criticized and attempts made to discover compatible literary approaches. The third category is that of people who have used particular models in the interpretation of key texts (e.g. Van Aarde 1988, Van Eck and van Aarde 1993, and Draper 1992). Here we should take note of some unpublished writings such as that of Nogwina (1993) on the use of antilanguage in the book of Revelation or the work of Long (1994) in his presentation of Jesus' cleansing of the temple in a Gramscian context.

## **5. Conclusion**

Sociological studies as one of the most recent trends in Biblical scholarship, has in the past twenty years made a real contribution to our understanding of the Biblical text. However, such a contribution has often been made possible where sociology has worked together with other methodologies, such as archaeology, cultural anthropology and literary studies. If anything we are now more conscious of the gulf which separates modern readers from the world of the Bible. On the positive side, we are also aware of the need for further original research in terms of areas like poverty and wealth, shame and honour, particularly in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the challenge facing scholars of the historical Jesus is to consider seriously the relationship between the reported words and the reported deeds of Jesus. Does the New Quest for the historical Jesus begin with his words or his deeds? How does one read the Gospels without confusing the ideology of the writers with that of the historical Jesus? Is that Jesus even accessible to modern scholarship or was Schweitzer right when he abandoned the quest for the enigmatic Jesus?

Sociological studies provide a framework within which to interpret both the Bible and related background studies (historical, literary or archaeological). The value of the variety of methods and models being used is in the consequent ability of one to check results across a wide spectrum. Clearly sociological studies are here to stay. They have not provided the definitive key for biblical research but they do take us closer to being able to interpret the Bible in context. For those scholars of the third world, the challenge continues to be the importance of relating that biblical context to our own. Our challenge is still to rediscover the biblical teaching regarding justice and the care of those whom society has oppressed and marginalized.

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